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SCIENCE
VS.
THE LAW

HORRORS!

The Summer's Scariest Movie



Sigourney Weaver and
She-Monster in *ALIENS*

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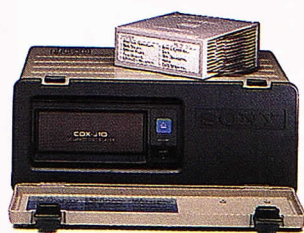
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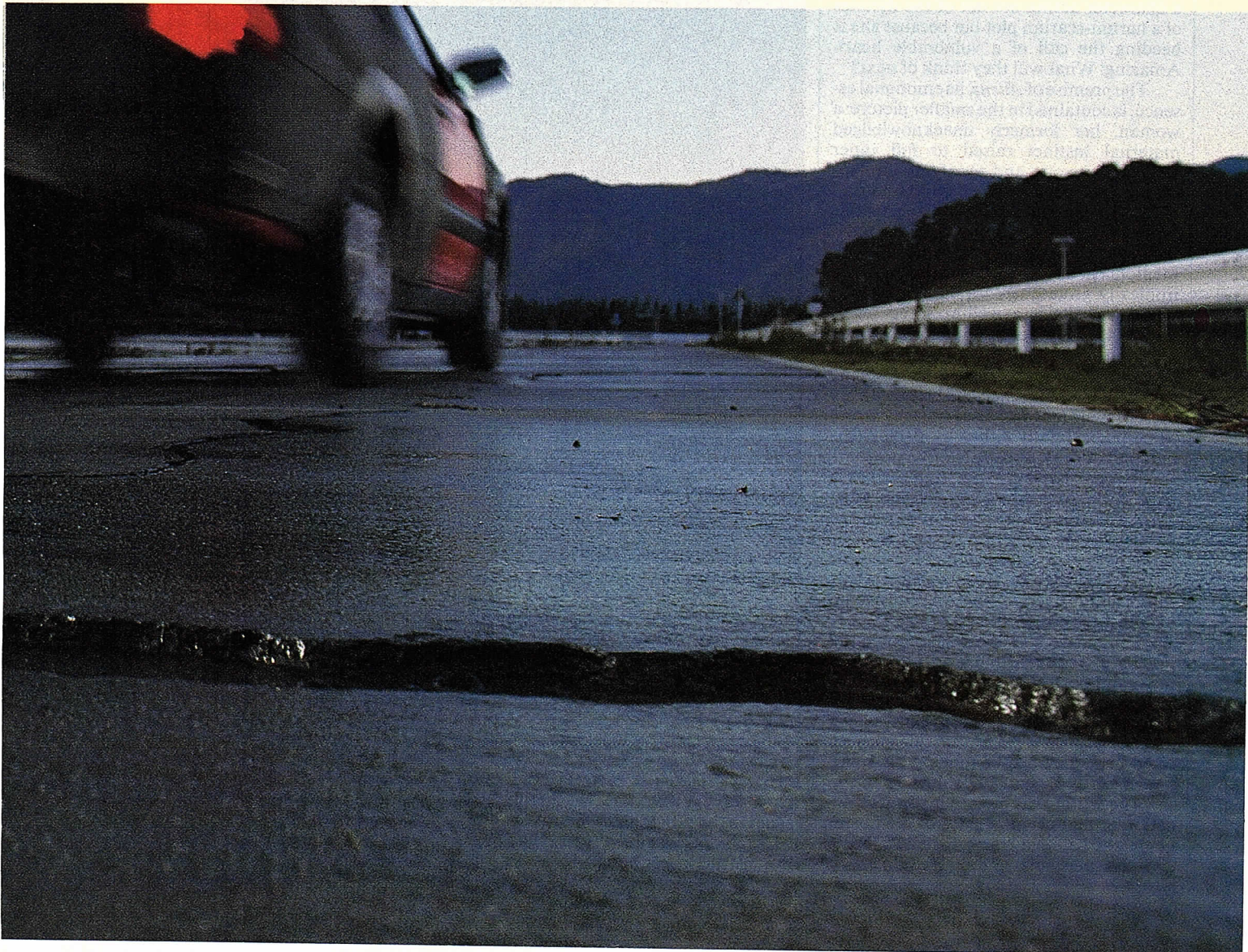
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COVER STORIES

Help! They're Back!

*Aliens storms in as
this summer's megahit*



Glance again to the right. These are rare photos, records of something no one expects to find in a high-speed, high-tech, high-action movie these days. They are pictures of a character acting not out of the dictates of a harum-scarum plot but because she is heeding the call of a vulnerable heart. Amazing! What will they think of next?

The premise of *Aliens*, its emotional essence, is contained in the smaller picture: a woman, her formerly unacknowledged maternal instinct raised to full inner scream by exotic and terrifying circumstances, takes a frightened child into desperately protective custody. The payoff is in the large photo: the climactic confrontation between this woman and her chief tormentor, leader of the alien monsters and—ironically, grotesquely—a single mom herself. Since she is a well-armed insect about 14 ft. tall, determined to propagate her kind, and since that activity requires human lives to be accomplished—as many as she and her innumerable brood can lay merciless pincers on—she is not a creature to be taken lightly either by Ripley (the heroine) or the audience.

Ripley? Ripley? That name rings a bell. Why, sure. She's the woman from *Alien*, isn't she? Must be. That movie had practically the same title as this one. You mean to say she's gone and got in trouble again? And they've made a sequel about that? And it's good? And we're supposed to take it seriously?

The answers to those last four questions are: yes, yes, that's an understatement and de gustibus. And they all hinge on the fact that the trouble Ripley has found this time is exponentially bigger and scarier than anything she encountered in Ridley Scott's memorably minimalist, eerily elegant 1979 film.

The wit of that picture lay in its relocation of that classic device of the horror genre, the haunted house. Instead of being a Gothic pile isolated on a bleak moor, it

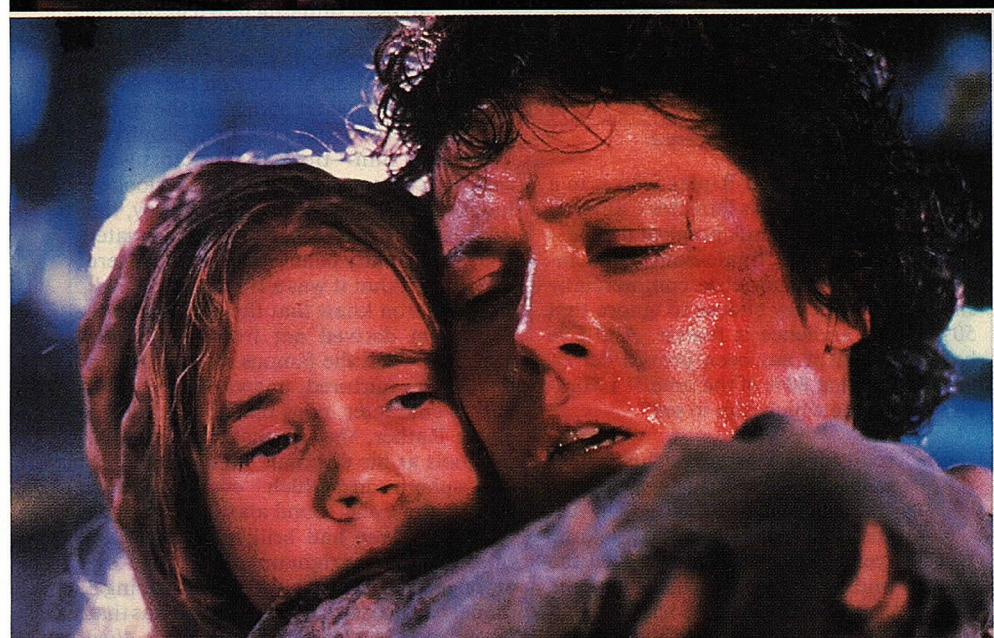
was a spaceship visiting an unwelcoming planet in an obscure corner of the universe. But the situation was the immemorial one: a monster, in this case an alien life-form requiring human hosts for gestation, is stalking the spaceship's endless, ill-lighted corridors, picking off victims one by one. But there was only one creature, six frightened earthlings and little more subtext (or, for that matter, dialogue) to the film than there was to *Friday the 13th* or *Halloween*. *Alien* lived as a demonstration of the power of style and

sheer moviemaking technique to transform tosh into terror that continues to haunt the memory.

And possibly it lives also as Sigourney Weaver's debut movie, for she was wonderfully effective as Ripley, the junior officer who must finally face down the monster in single combat. Cool, intelligent, yet vulnerable (and, of course, striking in appearance), she brings all these qualities to the sequel, which, seven years later, should make her a major star. For this movie stands to be something its predecessor was



Showdown in space: Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) stares into the spiky maw of her adversary



Weaver with Carrie Henn, as Newt

not, a megahit. And it deserves to be, for it is a remarkable accomplishment: a sequel that exceeds its predecessor in the reach of its appeal while giving Weaver new emotional dimensions to explore.

The premise is a straightforward one. As Ripley was drifting through space after her previous close encounter of the unspeakable kind—a flight that used up the equivalent of 57 earth years—the alien planet was colonized. But now, suddenly, it has fallen silent. Is it possible that this wild tale of rampaging monsters she

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BOB PENN

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keeps telling is true? A party of Marines is sent out to investigate, and Ripley reluctantly accompanies them as a sort of Cassandra-cum-consultant.

Arriving at their destination, they find the colonists' space station deserted, except for Newt (Carrie Henn), a traumatized child who is the only survivor. The first film had merely mobilized Ripley's basic fight-or-flight instincts. The presence of Newt allows her to discover stronger, higher impulses, gives her positive rather than negative emotions to act upon. The audience too has a much stronger rooting interest in Ripley, and that gives the picture resonances unusual in a popcorn epic.

At that last, simple level, the movie gives not just good weight but astounding value. The space outpost is not merely a more capacious haunted house than the first film's spaceship; it is the spookiest such structure in the history of movies, big enough to contain not only the large pool of potential victims but squads of monsters who keep coming at them from all directions.

Better still, it gives the movie's creators room to move around. Much of *Aliens*' originality results from the fact that the filmmakers have not confined themselves to the conventions of the horror genre. Without strain, and with a kind of manic good cheer, they meld into the film elements from many another pop tradition: action, adventure, even military comedy, anti-Establishment preachment and a well-taken satire on the yuppie mentality.

All of this is splendidly orchestrated in quickstep tempo. *Aliens* never forgets that its basic business is escapist, provided, of course, that your idea of escape is to give yourself over to a 2-hr. 17-min. movie that takes you up the ladder from apprehension to anxiety to fear to flat-out horror. Those big bugs are smart in their yucky way, and they are everywhere. Each time one of their human opponents opens a door or rounds a corner, you know terrible trouble is about to ensue. Anytime someone confidently announces what looks to be a foolproof plan to exterminate the aliens, you can be equally sure that this is another example of pride going before a slimy fall. Add to this plenty of snappy dialogue, gloriously staged combat sequences, imaginative hardware and special effects, the assured direction of James Cameron, and you have the elements that should add up to this summer's inescapable movie.

Yet all this splendid craftsmanship,

popular moviemaking at its best, is in the service of building rooting interest in the story of a woman who keeps finding ways to transcend the limits that unexamined custom often imposes on her sex. In action pictures, women are supposed to swoon or retreat to a safe corner (or, at best, praise the Lord and pass the ammunition) while the male lead protects them and defends Western civilization as we know it. In *Aliens*, it is the guys who are all out of ac-



Cameron and Hurd, with their drop ship aloft

Movies and sci-fi filled their adolescence.

tion at the climax and Ripley who is in a death duel with evil. As Director Cameron says, the endless "remulching" of the masculine hero by the "male-dominated industry" is, if nothing else, commercially shortsighted. "They choose to ignore that 50% of the audience is female. And I've been told that it has been proved demographically that 80% of the time, it's women who decide which film to see."

Credit for this accomplishment belongs primarily to just two people, Cameron, who turned 32 in August, and his wife Gale Anne Hurd, a year younger, who produced the picture and had an editorial say in the script ("Jim does most of the writing; I do most of the deleting"). It was their passion

for the project, very much the result of adolescent years spent watching movies and reading science fiction, that rescued *Aliens* from being one of those tempting ideas that Hollywood loves to lunch over and hates to launch.

In fact, Cameron and the idea, then known as *Alien II*, met when both were more or less unloved orphans in the industry. The 1979 *Alien* had turned a good profit for 20th Century-Fox, but not enough to create a compelling desire among the studio's management for a sequel. In any event, various alien life-forms kept coming and going in the executive suite. Some loved the "concept" while others deplored it, citing declining grosses for horror films.

Enter Cameron, a college dropout but a graduate of Roger Corman's famous schlock shop, where directors as divergent as Francis Coppola and Martin Scorsese had done their early professional work. There he also met his future wife, who was Corman's executive assistant. Cameron left in 1982 to direct his first feature, *Piranha II*. By 1983 Cameron and Hurd had written an original script called *The Terminator*, and *Alien*'s proprietors were impressed with it. They called Cameron in to discuss another project, about which they could not reach agreement. Before he left, however, Producer David Giler threw out the possibility of working on a new *Alien*. "I felt like he was digging out an old bone in the backyard," Cameron recalls, "dragging out something no one had been thinking much about."

Nobody but Cameron, that is. He thought *Alien* was the best science-fiction horror film ever made, "a high-water mark in the genre . . . There was a total philosophy in that film—the way the actors were

cast, the costumes, the way the sets looked functional and used and a bit grungy, the sounds of clinking chains, dripping water . . . People really believed while they were watching it that it was a true experience."

Cameron knew that the success of the Scott film derived not from any single gimmick—like the famous moment when the alien, nurtured unawares by John Hurt's character, pops bloodily out of his chest. Rather, the filmmaker, "using all the tools at his disposal," had created an atmosphere in which every shadow spooks and every sound alarms.

Since *Alien* had brilliantly exploited this limited form right up to its limits, "everyone said there was no upside to doing a sequel," Cameron says. "The logic was that if we turned out a hit, it was because *Alien*

was a hit; if it was a flop, it was because we did it." He needed to find ways of cross-referencing to it, reminding viewers of a beloved source, which he managed in both small and large ways (they still serve corn bread on spaceships, and *Aliens*' voyagers do not like it any better than the *Alien* crew did). At the same time, Cameron and Hurd, who had by now become partners, had to find ways of bursting generic bonds.

At this point Cameron did his usual unusual thing. He went into hibernation with a stack of legal pads, denying himself all sensory stimulation except music he deemed appropriate to the project (Gustav Holst's *The Planets*). He believes in junk-food diets as an aid to inspiration, "provided you don't take it past four months." Four days, fortunately, was all the time it took him to work up a treatment for *Aliens* that typed out at about 45 single-space pages.

The first tactic, of course, was to open up the new film and populate it. Aside from the fact that combat-trained women are fully integrated into the group, the crew members are 20th century grunts unregenerately projected into the far future. Led by the usual by-the-books lieutenant who is incompetent and by the usual kick-ass sergeant who is supercompetent, their numbers naturally include Hudson (Bill Paxton), a coward, and Hicks (Michael Biehn), a quiet, steadfast type, who turns out to be the bravest of the lot.

They provide comic relief, especially Hudson, whose "Let's get out of here" response to every situation makes him a kind of audience surrogate. For Cameron, however, the Marines have another unstated use: "Their training and technology are inappropriate for the specifics, and that can be seen as analogous to the inability of superior American firepower to conquer the unseen enemy in Viet Nam: a lot of firepower and very



A cool, convincing heroine armed for battle

This time, fighting for someone wonderful.

little wisdom, and it didn't work."

Two members of the party carry a heavier symbolic weight. Bishop (Lance Henriksen), an android who proves himself a distinct improvement over the traitor robot of the first film. Bishop offers a prejudice Ripley has to overcome and, in the end, some surprising heroics for the audience to cheer. The other outsider is a different case. Burke (Paul Reiser) is a junior executive in "the company," the monopoly that has all of space to profit from. He has absorbed its corporate culture all too well. In *Alien*, of course, company leaders, without warning employees of the danger, callously ordered them to bring an alien back alive, hoping it could be domesticated for use in the weapons division. Now Burke, who has the insinuating manner of an inside trader, is trying to do the same

thing, but merely to advance his sleazy career. Perfectly capable of reminding Ripley and Hicks of "the substantial dollar value" of the space station when they propose blowing it up in order to rid the universe of aliens, he is a wonderfully observed, comical version of the mid-'80s yuppie.

The largest function of all these people is to provide a bustling background for Ripley's quieter, more intense development. In the first film she was a smart, self-contained careerist, essentially a reactive character, desperately fighting against something but not for anybody or anything except her own life. The sequel gives her something, someone wonderful to fight for.

This is little Newt, the only survivor of the human colony. The role is endearingly played by Carrie Henn, 10, winner of a talent search among American girls living in England, where *Aliens* was filmed. She looks like a Dickensian waif and turns out to have the soul of one as well, brave and clever but never self-sentimentalizing. She is discovered as a silent little creature, scuttling through air

ducts too small for the aliens to penetrate, living an almost rodent-like existence. Her plight would be enough to touch anyone's heart, but in this context, only Ripley has the time and the wit to appreciate her.

Ripley's bonding with Newt is inevitable, as Hurd says, "because they were both survivors of their own particular group's encounter with extraterrestrial species. They knew what they were up against, and the others didn't. In *Alien*, people had to fight or die. Now Ripley could save herself but chooses to fight to save Newt." It is, in part, the unexpectedness and depth of her feelings that give the film its propulsive power, fueling the final hour to at least two more heart-stopper endings than the average thriller has.

Lance Henriksen as Bishop, the android



Michael Biehn as Hicks, the good guy



Paul Reiser as Burke, the nasty yuppie



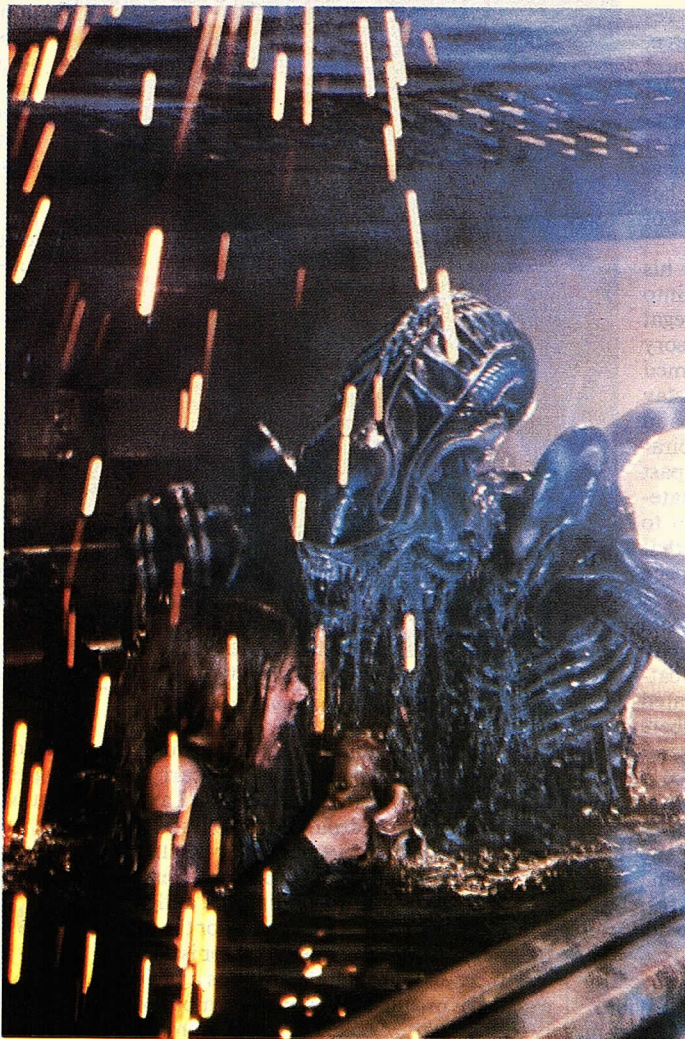
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All of this was beginning to take promising shape on paper in late 1983. But paper is not celluloid. And Cameron and Hurd needed a track record to support their developing vision. Luckily, it came in a rush. First, casting and finance finally came together for *The Terminator* script, which he directed and she produced. (It was during postproduction that their professional relationship turned into a romance that led to marriage ten months later.) In the meantime, he finished the script on which Sylvester Stallone did his usual devastating rewrite—and turned into *Rambo*. *The Terminator* was a low-budget (\$6.5 million) job, perhaps the most original movie of 1984 and a surprise critical and commercial hit. *Rambo*, of course, was *Rambo*, the movie phenomenon of the following year. ("I recognize parts of it," Cameron says manfully, but adds, "I was trying to create a semi-realistic, haunted character, the quintessential Viet Nam returnee, not a political statement.")

The back-to-back successes made the pair a force to be reckoned with and probably led the studio to let them produce and direct *Aliens*. Certainly the film would not have been so effective without the experience they gained on *The Terminator*. Cameron developed his directorial manner in that film—the low-angled camera, always moving with the action, never allowing the viewers to draw back into objectivity; the quick cutting that never lets them draw a deep breath. Says an admiring Scorsese: "What makes him interesting is his sense of surprise. Every scene builds on the last, then tops it."

A slight, soft-spoken woman, Hurd gained practice in the frugality and tough-mindedness that brought *Aliens* in on its relatively modest \$18 million budget. She is capable of denying her husband the time or the equipment he needs for one of his on-set brainstorms. When he insisted on a laser scanner for the picture's first sequence, she made him pay for it himself. All her grit was needed to cope with ten months of *Aliens* production in unenlightened England. "The British view of female producers proved to be a big problem for Gale," says her husband. "They didn't know such a creature existed. She was like a unicorn..." "Except that they like unicorns," she cuts in.

It could perhaps be said that one of the themes of their film, "bonding under pres-



Sparks fly as the menacing mom attacks Newt

The bugs are smart in their yucky way, and they are everywhere.

sure," as Cameron puts it, is one of the themes of their lives, their love affair having developed out of their high-velocity work on *The Terminator*. And, in fact, they do not have much in common in their backgrounds. The daughter of a well-to-do private investor, she was raised mainly in Palm Springs, Calif. A confessed academic overachiever, she graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Stanford. He was born in Canada, the son of an electrical engineer, and ended up in Brea, Calif., where he spent five semesters at local colleges, dropping out and eventually drifting into Corman's orbit. As adolescents, she was a reader, while he was a drawer, often of fantastic sci-fi visions. She liked "film," as he put it, while he was drawn to the "movies." And he has been heard to wonder if, in her Palm Springs days, she would have dated a boy from across the tracks, as he was. "There are no tracks in Palm Springs," she replies airily.

They needle each other constantly, using, as they do in the film, humor to relieve the pressures of a life that revolves obsessively around their work. Their professional style is based on the belief that the producer-director team that works harder than anyone else and knows in detail every

aspect of the production is bound to command respect. Cameron can be demanding on the set. Recalls Reiser: "Working with him wasn't like a frolic." Says Henriksen, who has completed three locations with Cameron: "He is the bride in every wedding and the corpse at every funeral." Most of the couple's decisions are mutual, except when he is staging a scene or working with his designers (she acknowledges that his visual sense is stronger than hers), or when she is working through the details of the business side of a movie (where he knows he would be more indulgent).

But something more delicate and interesting than their style of conducting their joint careers may be emerging from the Cameron-Hurd collaboration. It is something that, if their success achieves exemplary status, could influence the immediate future of the movies. It is the restoration of something like an adult sensibility to the action movie, a belief, shared by such classicists of the genre as John Ford and Howard Hawks, that besides telling a rattling good yarn at a nerve-busting pace, pictures of this kind can carry a theme, even—shocking word these days—a moral.

This sensibility begins, perhaps, with Cameron's willingness to let his wife "delete" what she calls his "truck driv-

er" language and their desire to make their action films "intense, uncompromising, but with the amount of gore restrained and deaths inferred offstage—even those of people you'd like to see torn limb from limb," as he puts it. It proceeds through the fact that in both *The Terminator* and *Aliens*, evil is symbolized by nonhuman characters; it continues with the demonstration, in both pictures, that "it's more interesting to see a normal person in abnormal circumstances than a highly trained person like Superman or James Bond." People who try to act like superheroes in *Aliens* all end up dead because, finally, "the movie is about finding *personal* resources: will, courage, whatever." Or, as Weaver puts it, "I like to think the real message is love."

Sounds odd, doesn't it? But that is only because the movies have lately forgotten a fact that never used to escape them, which is that love can turn up in the strangest places. And is never more welcome, as a sign of human grace, than when the pressure of deadly events is at its height.

—By Richard Schickel.
Reported by Elaine Dutka/New York